

MORE KENYA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

by

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In the last issue of this Journal there was an account of a traditional instrumentalists' course conducted by Kenya's Music and Drama Officer in September 1958. As a result of this course considerable information was gleaned about some of Kenya's musical instruments, particularly those from the Lake Victoria province of the country. In October 1959, instrumentalists were again invited to take part in another research course and twenty one instrumentalists accepted the invitation, fifteen again from the Lake province and six others from Digo country in the coastal area in Kwale district, not far from Mombasa.

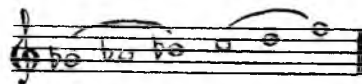
Amongst those instruments brought from the coast, perhaps the most interesting was the '*Nzumari*' which is a wood wind instrument with a double reed, made and played by Juma Masafari. The reed itself is made from the leaf of the *Mvumo*, or *Barassus* palm, and it gives the instrument a very remarkable quality of tone, not unlike the bag-pipe. When played by an expert the sound is continuous without any break for taking a breath and it is a matter for conjecture how the instrumentalist maintains a constant flow of breath. The overall length of the instrument is just over thirteen inches; the centre part, which is made of bamboo in which five holes are cut, is about six inches long.

In giving the tuning of this and other instruments the normal musical notation is used for the following reasons. In the first place the requisite set of tuning forks was not available to supply information about the number of vibrations per second for each note produced. Secondly, while such mathematical data has its own value, musically, the notation used here will mean much more than a list of figures could possibly do. The tuning of the '*Nzumari*' is as follows.



This represents of course one form of the pentatonic scale, but its point of departure is a little unusual.

Another wood wind instrument from Digo country was the '*Chivoti*', which is the first transverse flute which the Music and Drama Officer has so far come across in Kenya. It is made of bamboo. The instrumentalist, Sudi Mwakatsumi, brought two specimens of this flute tuned at a slightly different pitch and these provided a useful cross-check of the tonal system employed in the tuning. The tuning of the two instruments was as follows.

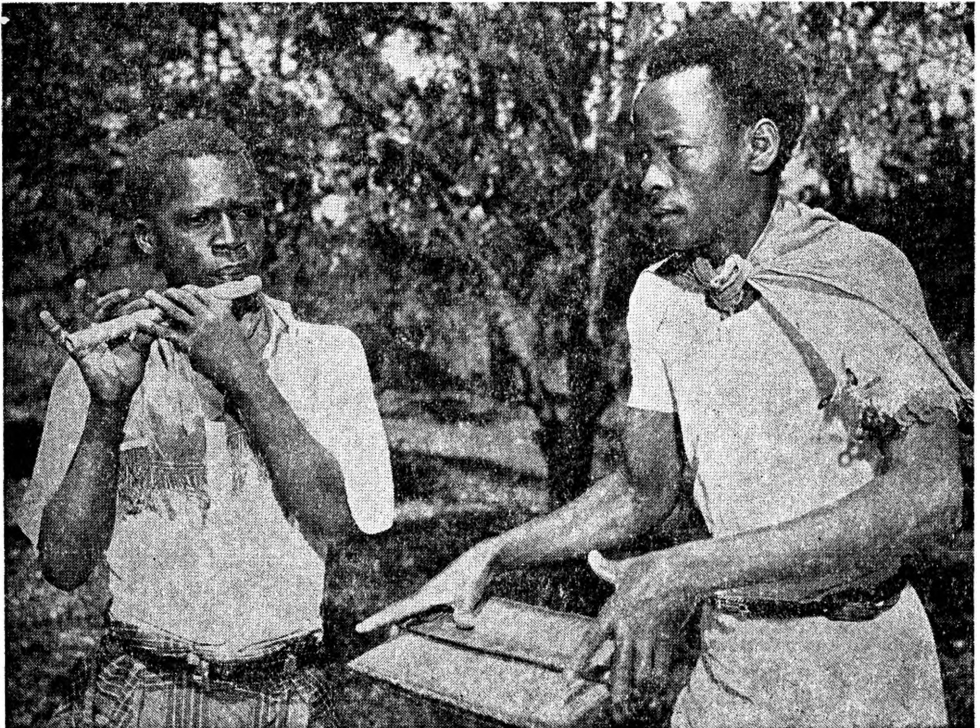


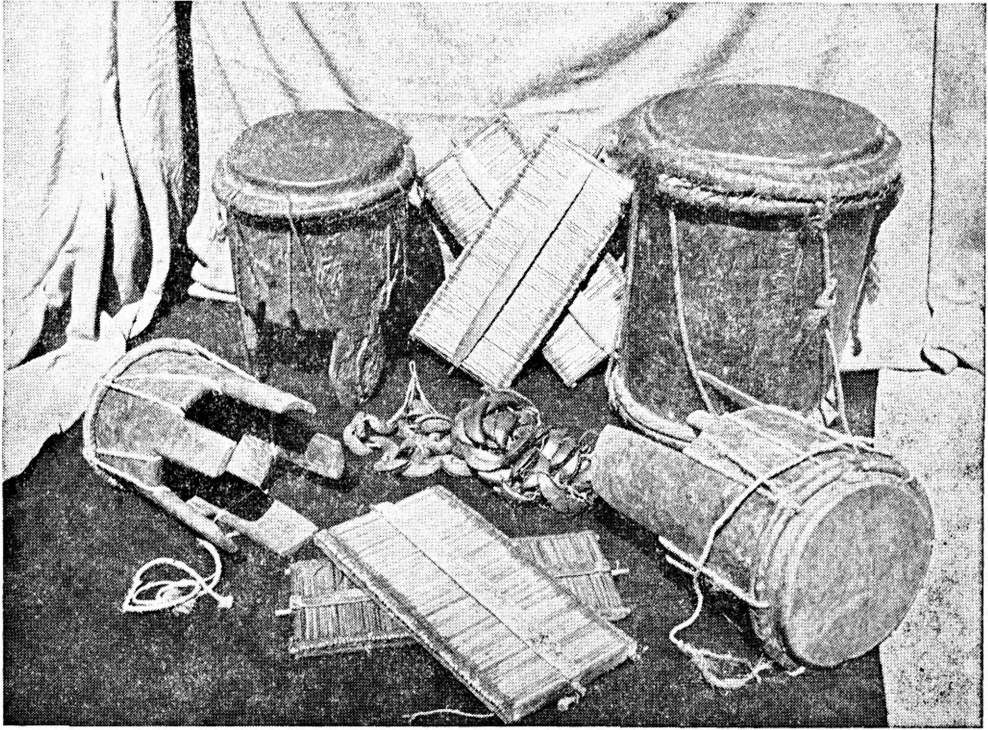
Taken as a whole, this series of notes makes a strange progression. It seems to start off as a thorough going whole tone scale but this is not continued beyond the fifth where there is a leap of a minor third to the note which is a major seventh from the initial note, and thus the octave is not completed. In practice this scale is not thought



(Above) Fig. 1.

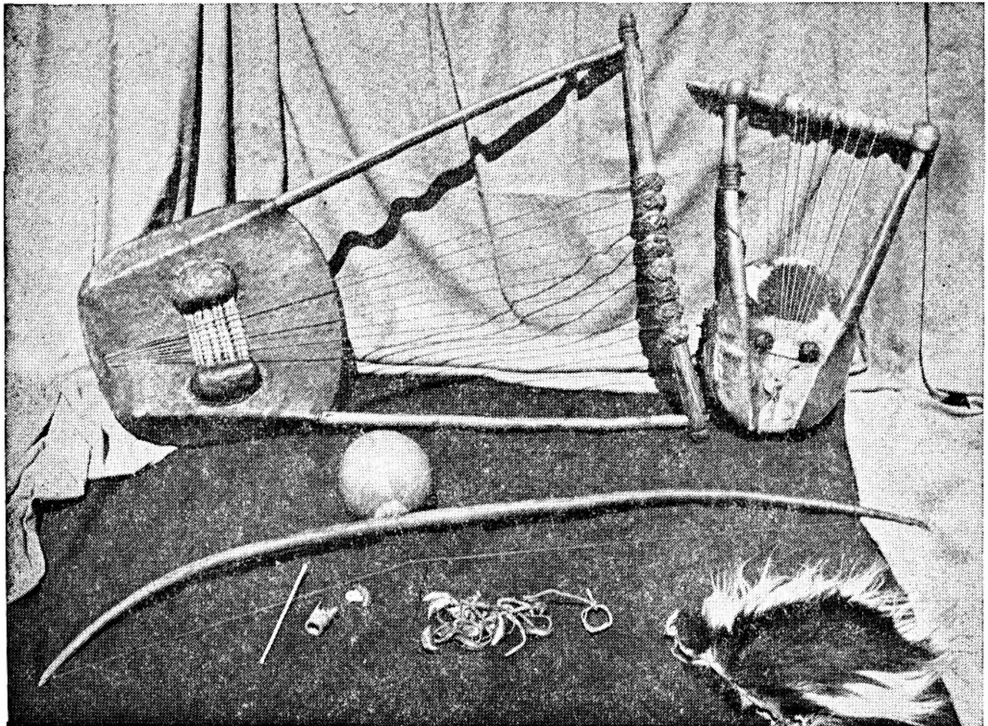
(Below) Fig. 2.





(Above) Fig. 3.

(Below) Fig. 4.



of in this way. More careful study would have to be made to discover the precise melodic pattern which emerges with the use of this rather odd looking scale, but at first sight it would appear that the notes are regarded as being in two groups of three.

There was yet another quaint little wind instrument from Digo country known as the '*Mwarutu*', made from the fruit of the *mkwakwa* tree. An attempt was made to discover what this fruit was. The Swahili dictionary describes the *mkwakwa* as 'a tree bearing an edible fruit', which isn't very helpful. The description given by the instrumentalists themselves sounded very much like that of a pomegranate, and it was said that baboons were very fond of the fruit itself. The '*Mwarutu*' certainly looks as if it might have been made from the hard shell of a small pomegranate, the mouthpiece being the hole left by the removal of the twig. Two other holes are made to produce two more notes, and yet a fourth is obtained by tilting the lips over the mouthpiece. This fourth note, which is incidentally the lowest, has not the same clarity of tone as the others. The tuning is like this.



A number of percussion instruments were also brought from Digo country. The first was a group of drums. The illustration shows the '*Mshirima*' standing on the right which is a double ended drum about 21 inches high, and just over 13 inches across the top. The other three drums which look rather like stools are known as '*Ganda*'. The drummers are very particular about the tuning of these drums, the tone being raised by pressing down the rim round the top, or lowered by dealing a firm blow to the top of the drum. During the singing of one particular song, no less than five drums are played by one drummer; these are the big '*Mshirima*', three '*Ganda*' and another smaller double ended drum known as the '*Chapuo*'.

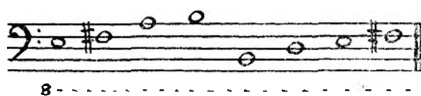
Four '*Kayamba*' rattles are also shown in the illustration and these are very common in the coastal region of Kenya. They measure some 16 inches in length and are 8 inches wide. They are made from two layers of reeds, with seeds in between. Quite apart from the rattle effect produced by shaking the instrument from side to side, an additional rhythmic pattern is provided by striking the wooden strip fixed across the middle of the '*Kayamba*' with the thumbs.

Ankle bells are found all over Kenya but those from the coastal district were fastened together in four rows of about fifteen each, making some sixty in all, which are fastened rather like a shin pad on the instrumentalist's right leg. They are known as '*Nzuga*' in Digo country.

From Lake Victoria Province there were two stringed instruments of particular interest. One of these was the '*Ntono*' bow, played by Imuhanga Kyaro, a Mtende by tribe, from the Kenya-Tanganyika border. The bow is about 4 feet 6 inches long and the wire across the length of the bow is caught at two places. The short wire some four inches from one end is a tuning device and the other longer wire nearer the centre of the bow fixes the interval between the two notes produced by the relative lengths of the wire on either side as a fourth. The gourd at this point is of course the resonator. The neck of this gourd is also made use of, being cut to form a finger stall which is worn on the middle finger of the instrumentalist's left hand with which he holds the bow. This finger stall is pressed against the wire of the bow to produce a third note, approximately a major second above the lower note, which of course makes it a minor third below the upper note. The instrument is played using a thin striker held in the

right hand and a gentle percussion accompaniment is produced by a small bell fixed on the little finger of this hand. The musical effect is completed, as is so often the case, by the instrumentalist's singing to the accompaniment of the '*Ntono*'.

The second stringed instrument worthy of note was the 'double bass' of traditional instruments in Kenya. It comes from Kisii country and is known as the '*Obukano*'. It is about 42 inches long, 31 inches wide across the top of the frame, and the resonating bowl is some 18 inches in diameter. The wide bridge over which the strings run is held in position by large lumps of bees' wax. The tuning is interesting and extends to an octave but the octave itself occurs in the middle, between the fourth and fifth strings of the instrument. It will be seen that the two outside notes are duplicated.



The instrumentalist who plays this '*Obukano*' is Nyatama Onchuru, and when asked how he learned the instrument he said that in the first place he was very much attracted to it when he was a small boy. When his father wasn't looking he would get hold of the instrument and strum away to his heart's content. Later on his father gave him more formal instruction.

The new instruments which have come to light during this second course for traditional instrumentalists in Kenya have convinced the Music and Drama Officer that, for some time to come, more and more treasures of the music making of the past will continue to appear, and year by year it will be possible to build up an increasingly comprehensive record of photographs, notes and recordings.